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SUBJECT: SLOW BUT STEADY: MOVING AGRICULTURAL BIOTECHNOLOGY FORWARD
AT THE VATICAN

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Summary

[1](#)1. (C) With a grant from EB, Post brought three American researchers to speak with various Holy See interlocutors to increase acceptance and understanding of agricultural biotechnology in advance of the publication of a key Vatican document on hunger. After several years of lobbying by Post, the Vatican has become "cautiously optimistic" about GMO food. With most Vatican officials, the science is not the issue. The question is about exploitation: who benefits from these technologies, the multinationals or the farmers? With the help of the department we chose three speakers with experience in the developing world who addressed these concerns directly, discussing the economic and health benefits to farmers, and important research that is being done on non-cash crops such as cassava. The group met with an impressive roster of interlocutors. Although progress on a delicate question like this is necessarily slow, the visit was another step forward on the issue. End Summary.

Experts from Academia and Non-Profits

[1](#)2. (C) Mr. Lawrence Kent of the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center, Dr. Carl Pray of Rutgers University, and Dr. Greg Traxler of Auburn University spoke with Vatican representatives from the Pontifical Council Cor Unum (the Vatican's

clearinghouse for the Catholic Church's humanitarian assistance), the Pontifical Academy of Life, the Vatican's Secretariat of State (Foreign Ministry), the Pontifical Council

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for Justice and Peace, and a group of Jesuit administrators from Africa. The Ambassador also hosted a working lunch with representatives from other relevant Vatican departments, including Health, Mission Territories (covering much of the developing world), and the Vatican's top theological body.

13. (C) Our strategy was to target departments that will have input - or at least a clearance on - the revision of a Vatican document on hunger put out by Cor Unum. We hoped to educate Vatican officials who were suspicious of the technology, as well as those who are already on board. The former could try to halt forward progress on the issue, while the latter will be more effective advocates if they can better address typical Vatican concerns on the issue. Conversations with representatives from the Franciscan and Jesuit orders were particularly important due to the vocal opposition of some members of these orders, and many social-justice oriented Catholics with connections to them.

What's in it for the Poor?

14. (C) Most interlocutors wanted to know how farmers and the poor could benefit from agricultural biotechnology, and were interested in data indicating that the farmers themselves actually realized the majority of economic benefits of GMO seed with greater yields. Our speakers explained that the cost of seeds was frequently offset by lowered pesticide expenses and higher yields. The fact that farmers could also benefit from the technology through better health conditions (in particular, reduced use of pesticides) was also a point of interest to most of the Vatican officials. They were all keen to hear about the

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decrease in health problems among Chinese farmers spraying cotton crops, and the decrease in black fungus on corn crops in South Africa, which have led to higher production and income and lower medical costs.

15. (C) Kent's presentation was of particular interest to the Holy See, as he discussed progress his NGO has made on non-cash crops. Kent answered the very questions that Vatican officials have asked us in the past: where is the research on the crops that are really going to help small subsistence farmers in the developing world?(ref a) He described work being done on enriched, disease-resistant cassava, an innovation that could be crucial for Africa since more than a third of all Africans get most of their daily calories from cassava. While cassava fills people's stomachs, Kent explained, it doesn't provide nutrition, which means while some people may not be hungry, they are still malnourished. Further, he continued, an insidious virus can often destroy large portions of the crop with little warning. Kent's point hit home: his NGO is going to give away this technology when it is ready. The U.S. and related multi-nationals are not going to get rich off cassava. But as long as irrational fears and restrictions hinder testing, development, and implementation of the technology, the hungry will continue to wait, Kent emphasized.

Concerns

¶6. (C) Several interlocutors voiced concern about the regulation of agricultural biotechnology, and were reassured when the speakers explained U.S. procedures for the approval of this technology - procedures they compared to the hurdles pharmaceutical companies must clear when introducing a new drug. Speakers acknowledged Vatican concerns about multi-national exploitation, and called for greater public-sector investment in the technology. Pray noted that China was one of the only countries with any such investment.

Surprising Frenchmen

¶7. (C) Vatican officials raised EU opposition to agricultural biotechnology in several instances, begging the question of the Vatican's role in the debate. We impressed upon sympathetic listeners that the Holy See could influence the conversation, even in secular Western Europe, if the question is framed as a moral one with implications for the hungry. Several officials grasped the dynamic immediately. French Monsignors Jean Laffitte and Jacques Suaudeau from the Pontifical Academy of Life admitted that the Europeans were against agricultural biotechnology out of sheer protectionism. The Frenchmen were two of our most enthusiastic interlocutors on the issue, and inquired about restrictions on testing and other barriers in particular African nations (septel). Laffitte, Vice President of the Academy, praised the government of Burkina Faso for its testing of bt-cotton and criticized Catholic involvement in the refusal of GMO food aid in Zambia.

Jesuit Challenge

¶8. (C) After the controversy over Jesuit involvement in the refusal of U.S. food aid to Zambia several years ago, and the continuing vocal opposition among many Jesuits to these

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technologies, our meeting with a group of African Jesuits at the worldwide headquarters of the order was particularly important. The deputy superiors (provincials) of African provinces of the Society of Jesus, hailing from Madagascar, Zimbabwe, Nairobi, Cameroon, Dem. Congo, Rwanda, Zambia, and Nigeria were in Rome for meetings with the Jesuit Father General, and with the help of a good contact in the Jesuit Curia, we were able to get on their schedule. The group lived up to its reputation as skeptical: many voiced concerns about U.S. economic interests, potential dependency on the part of farmers, trade inequities, and concerns about biodiversity. They also mentioned concerns over corruption and inequitable food distribution. For our part, we emphasized that the USG would never claim that agricultural biotech was a cure-all for world poverty and hunger; there are many aspects to the issue. Nevertheless, we

pointed out that the possibilities for these technologies to contribute to a solution to these ills were too great to ignore.

Our speakers gained some credibility with the Jesuits when they made it clear that they were simply college professors and researchers presenting what they had learned - not on the Monsanto payroll. We may not have changed all of their minds, but they surely left better educated on the issues, and with a lot of questions for the naysayers in their order.

Comment

¶9. (C) Progress on agricultural biotech at the Vatican is slow, as is progress on any complicated issue in which any number of Holy See departments can claim an interest. Non-specialists are also susceptible to the great amount of misinformation on the subject, especially in Europe. Some officials had heard aspects of our arguments before, but had been barraged in the meantime by propaganda from anti-GMO groups, some of them with a connection to the Catholic Church. Our goal was to create a more knowledgeable audience among key decision-makers at the Vatican, and a more receptive environment in advance of the publication of the Cor Unum document on hunger. The target date for the document is now uncertain, but we see it as a key opportunity to advance our goals on this issue. In the wake of the publication of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's 2003-04 State of Food and Agriculture Report on agricultural biotechnology, it would be difficult for Cor Unum to avoid the topic if it attempts to address world hunger in any comprehensive way.

¶10. (C) In the meantime, this visit represented another step forward in creating a more favorable atmosphere for agricultural biotech at the Vatican. In one telling moment at the Ambassador's luncheon, Fr. Wojciech Giertych, the high-profile Theologian of the Papal Household, took the floor after listening with interest to Kent's presentation. He said that something about GMO food was still a little unsettling to him, but that hearing about the speakers' work had impressed him. Acknowledging the promise of these technologies for the developing world, he wondered if irrational fears were needlessly complicating the issue. "We shouldn't be afraid of working with nature to improve the lot of human beings," he concluded.

¶12. (SBU) Post would like to thank EB for funding this program, EB/TTP/ABT/BTT and USAID/EGAT/ESP/IRBfor their excellent speaker recommendations, and IIP for their critical support and coordination.SANDROLINI